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Cezanne's Studio

By AMBROISE VOLLARD

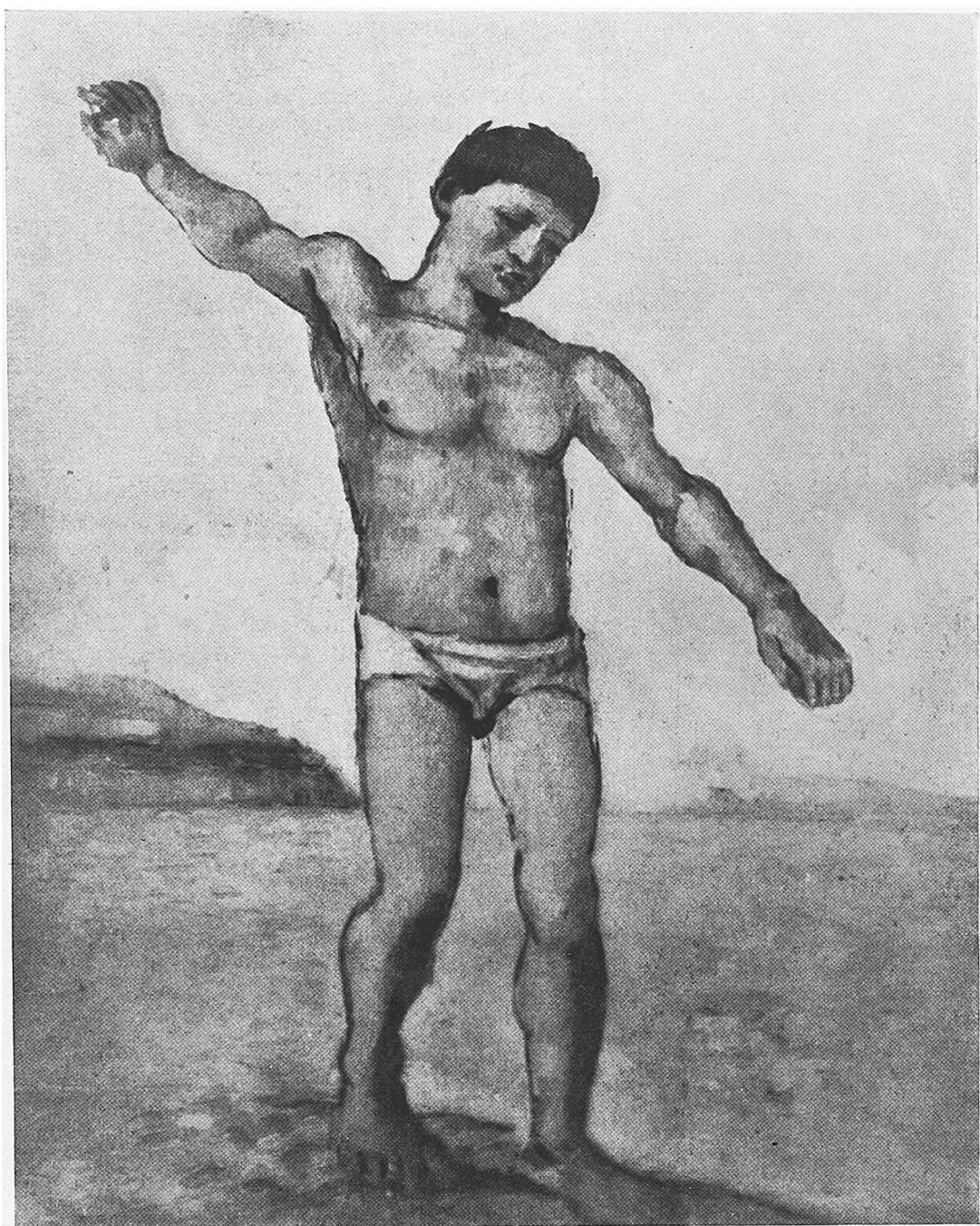
Cezanne always seemed so well disposed toward me that one day I was bold enough to ask him to paint my portrait. To this he consented, and we met by appointment the following day at his studio in the rue Hegessippe-Moreau. In the middle of the room a chair was standing on a box, which in turn was raised by means of four slim supports. As I looked at the structure with considerable trepidation Cezanne told me he had prepared it for me to pose on. "Oh, there is no danger of your falling Mr. Vollard, if only you keep your equilibrium. . . . Besides, when one poses one must be quiet." Once seated and with how many precautions! I was careful not to make a single false movement. The immobility, however, caused me to feel drowsy; this I fought victoriously for some time, but finally inclined my head upon my shoulder; equilibrium then ceased, and the chair, box and myself all fell to the floor. Cezanne ran to me. "Unfortunate man! You have disturbed the pose! Really, you must be as quiet as an apple, an apple that never moves." From that day on I used to drink a large glass of black coffee before posing. Moreover, Cezanne kept his eye on me and whenever he thought I showed signs of fatigue he would look at me significantly and I immediately would assume the pose of an angel—that is to say, "an apple that never moves."

The sittings took place in the morning at eight o'clock and lasted until half-past eleven. Upon my arrival Cezanne would fold up his "Pelerin" or "Croix," which were his favorite papers. "Those papers are really very strong," he used to say, "they lean on Rome." It was at the time of the war between the English and the Boers, and Cezanne being on the side of justice, would usually add: "Do you think the Boers will win?" The studio in rue Hegessippe-Moreau was even more simply furnished than the one in Aix. A few reproductions of Forain, cut from the illustrated papers, made up the greater part of his collection of Parisian Art. What Cezanne used to call his Veronese, his Rubens, his Lucius Signorelli, his



Study of Heads

Cézanne



Bathing Boy

Paul Cézanne

Delacroix, that is, a small lot of penny pictures, were in Aix. One day I told him that he could obtain very beautiful reproductions at Brown's. His answer was, "Brown sells to the Museum." Purchasing of a dealer who sold to the Museum was to him the extravagance of a Nabob.

On one occasion I made the ill-inspired suggestion that he decorate his walls with a few of his own works; thereupon he hung up about ten of his large water-colors. But one day, during a sitting, when something did not go just as he liked, he wished everything to the devil, furiously tore down the water-colors and threw them into the fire. There were a few great flames and Cezanne quieted down and went back to work.

Every afternoon Cezanne used to go to the Louvre or the Trocadero to draw from the Masters. One day, towards evening, he stopped in to see me for a moment, his face shining with happiness. "Mr. Vollard, I have something good to tell you. I am well pleased with the study I have been working on; if the weather is clear tomorrow I think we will have a good sitting." One of his principal concerns, when the day was over, was the weather of the following. As he was in the habit of going to bed early, it frequently happened that he would awake in the middle of the night.

Always occupied with the idea of the weather he would look out at the sky from his window, and, once satisfied as to that very important matter, he would take up his candle and examine the study upon which he was working. If he had a good impression of it, he would wake up his wife and tell her of his gratification. Then to reward her and make amends for having disturbed her, he would invite her to play a game of checkers before again retiring.

In order that a sitting have its chance of being considered good by him it did not suffice that Cezanne be gratified with his work at the Louvre and that the weather be clear; there were other necessary conditions, and particularly, that he should not hear the noises of the "Sledge-hammer factory"—which was a nearby elevator thus named by Cezanne. I was careful not to disturb his hopes that those people would one day go broke. He thought they would because the repairing was done at frequent intervals and he believed that the

work was stopped through lack of business. What he hated also was to hear a dog bark. In the neighborhood there was one dog that barked occasionally though not loudly, but Cezanne was extremely sensitive to noises he disliked. One morning when I arrived he told me very joyfully, "This Lepine (chief of police) is a wonderful fellow. He has given orders to catch all the dogs—it is in the 'Croix.'" We proceeded in the meantime with several good sittings; the sky remained clear and by a fortunate coincidence the dog as well as the "sledge-hammer factory" remained quiet. But one day, just as Cezanne had repeated his praise of Lepine, we heard a faint "bow-wow." At once he dropped the palette which he was preparing and exclaimed in despair, "the beggar has escaped!"

There are only a few persons who have seen Cezanne at work, as he disliked to be observed while painting. When one admires his work, so perfect in form, so beautiful in color, one cannot imagine to what extent, through many days, it was slow and painstaking. On one of the hands of the portrait, which he made of me, there were two small spots where the canvas was not covered. As I remarked it to Cezanne, he said: "If my work in the Louvre to-day is all right, perhaps I shall find something with which to cover those spots. You will understand, Mr. Vollard, that if I put something there haphazardly I should have to start the whole picture over again from that point." The thought of which made me shiver.

While working on my portrait Cezanne started an important composition of nudes, the largest canvas he ever painted—or to be exact, tried to paint, for it never developed further than a sketch. For these compositions Cezanne used drawings from nature he once made in his Swiss studio, and also the studies he made in the Museums. His dream was to have his models pose in the open air, but this was not realizable for various reasons, the most important of which was his timidity about women, even when clothed. The only exception was an old servant he formerly employed in the *Jas the Bouffan*, an old creature with wrinkled face, of which he said to Zola with admiration, "Look, isn't it great? One would say a man!"

I was, therefore, quite surprised one day when he told me that

he was to have a model pose in the nude. "How is it, Mr. Cezanne, that you are to have a nude model?"—"Oh! Mr. Vollard, I shall take a very old carcass." He was well satisfied with her, and after having used her for a figure study, made two portraits of her which recall to one's mind the poor relations one meets in the tales of Balzac.

Cezanne declared that he had derived much less satisfaction from this "camel," posing for him than he had from me. "It has become very difficult," he said, "to work with a model; still I pay much for every sitting; as much as four francs—twenty sous more than before the war. Ah! If I could only realize your portrait." His hopes were always the same; the Salon of Bouguereau, and after that, the Louvre, upon which he looked as the only shelter worthy of his art.

In painting, Cezanne used very pliable brushes that resembled sable, which, after each touch he would wash with turpentine in a brush-holder. However large the number of brushes, he would soil them all during a sitting and would soil himself as well—this to such an extent that it is not surprising that once as he was returning from sketching he was asked by the gendarmes to show his identification papers. Cezanne asserted that he was a resident, but they replied that they did not know him. "Eh! I am sorry," ejaculated Cezanne, but with such an intonation that the gendarmes entertained no further doubts. This was surely a man from Aix!

One can understand the quality of solidity in his paintings by the method which he employed. He did not work with a full brush, but used to apply, one upon another, numerous touches as thin as water color, which dried instantaneously; there was then no chance for that inward action which causes cracks when an outer layer of paint is applied over a wet inner layer and each dries at a different time.

I have already said that Cezanne disliked to be watched while painting. Regarding this, a friend of his, Mr. R., who sometimes accompanied him out to his "motive," told me that once he saw an old woman who sat knitting a short distance away. She paid no attention whatever to them, but her presence, even at some little dis-

tance, greatly exasperated Cezanne. As soon as his quick and piercing eyes discovered her, he exclaimed, "There's the old cow again!" and in spite of all his friend's efforts to dissuade him he furiously gathered up his things and quit the place. Another time Cezanne was working in the fields in company with a young painter, Mr. Le Bail, whom he had placed in front of him in order that the young man could not observe him. A stranger strolling by looked at Cezanne's canvas and then went on to see the work of the other painter. "I like the work of the young one better," he loudly exclaimed. Thereupon Cezanne immediately left the spot, much annoyed at the reflection of the rustic, and furious at having been seen painting.

He had an unshakable belief that the public understood how to judge the "realization." It was not necessary, however, for the public to understand his work in order to "discover" a certain "clumsiness" in it, having so often heard of his continual complaint at not being able to "realize." Someone having suggested that this must have come from a defect of vision, Cezanne seized upon it as a pretext to reaffirm his pretended impotence to realize, and Huysmans drew from this legendary visual defect a conclusion as original as it was surprising when he described the painter thus: "An artist with a sick retina, who, out of exasperation at his defective sight, fashions the beginnings of a new art."

While he worked on my portrait he scarcely permitted me to say a word. Yet he would talk freely himself as I prepared to pose and during the short intervals of rest that he granted me. One morning as I arrived I found him laughing boisterously over an announcement he had read in the "Pelerin" to the effect that stocks were being offered for sale under the name of Sosnovice, which he pronounced "sauce novice." "These people will fail," he said, "the public is not so stupid as to buy anything with a name like that!" Sometime afterwards I found Cezanne worried. The stock had gone up. "You see, Mr. Vollard, they have found some weak people. It is dreadful, life!" Then, with contentment and that sort of repose which one who is on the safe side feels at seeing the other fellow caught, he added: "I, who am not practical in life, lean on my sister, who leans on her confessor, a Jesuit, who leans on Rome. (Those people are very strong.)" On hearing this great painter humoring himself with



Flowers (detail)

Cézanne



Homage To Woman

Cezanne

this sort of childishness, and seeing him accept off-hand everything without any scrutiny whatever, superficial observers would be tempted to take advantage of such "naivete," but, when Cezanne sized up the situation, as he usually did, he would come out tooth and nail, and after having rid himself of the intruder, would triumphantly put it in his favorite phrase: "The beggar, he would take me by the collar!" Explaining why he appeared to permit people to impose upon him, he once said: "It is usually a very long time after an event takes place, or an idea is expressed to me that I see clearly its character and significance."

Cezanne did not like Ingres. But often, after considerable struggling with that master's drawing, unable to comprehend it, he would forget his hate for an instant, and exclaim: "This Dominican is beggarly strong!" Then, calmed by concession to the probity of Ingres' art he would laugh, as if to ridicule his anxiety, and add: "But he gives me a pain."

I have been told that Cezanne made slaves of his models. In fact, I knew it from my own experience. From the first stroke of the brush to the end of the sitting he treated his model as so much still life. He liked to paint portraits. "The final aim of Art," he used to say, "is the face." If he did not paint more of them it was because of his difficulty in getting models as tractable as myself. Thus it was, that, having painted himself and his wife a number of times, as well as his available friends, among them the coming novelist Zola, who then believed in Cezanne, and who posed for him in the nude (which study has disappeared), Cezanne was led by preference to painting apples and, still more willingly, flowers, which did not fade for he used only those of paper. Only, "These cursed beggars, they change their color with age!" Then, in certain moments of exasperation at the cussedness of things, he would fall back upon the pictures in "Magasin Pittoresque," of which he owned several volumes, or even upon the fashion magazines his sisters used to receive. After which he would hope for clear gray weather, dread the barking of dogs, the "sledge-hammer factory" and other such annoyances.

He found in me the most submissive of models, and was therefore in no hurry about finishing my portrait. "This serves me as a

study," he used to say, in again taking up some detail "quite well realized," and would add, thinking to fill me with joy: "You are beginning to know how to pose." One day after a sitting, during which his ill humor showed itself several times, and after I had left, having made an appointment for the following day, Cezanne said suddenly to his son, "The sky is becoming a clear gray. While I eat something run to Vollard and bring him back here at once!" "But do you not fear to tire Vollard?" "What matters that, since the weather is clear gray?" "But if you tire him too much to-day, he may not be able to pose to-morrow." "You are right, son, we should not abuse our models. You have the understanding of life."

Apropos of this glimpse of his impracticability of life, of which Cezanne was secretly becoming proud, though pretending to be sorry, I remember once during one of the most severe winters, while crossing a bridge, I had stopped to admire the Seine, which was filled with enormous drifts of ice, when I saw someone washing brushes on the bank of the river. It was Cezanne. "The water is frozen at the studio," he said. "Let us hope this does not happen here!" And he looked uneasily at the drifts of ice, which were touching one another.

During my posing I was most apprehensive, for the sake of my portrait, of the appearance on the scene of the terrible palette knife which I had already seen in operation when Cezanne felt the least annoyance, whether real or imagined. For example, seeing his son a little tired, he would imagine that the young boy stayed out at night. Woe be to the canvas which was before him then. And with what care did I not guard my every word. Especially was I careful not to utter the word "savants" or "professeurs," the two aversions par excellence of Cezanne; to tell the truth I scarcely spoke of anything, because Cezanne, his mind filled with his all-absorbing art, might, without noticing what I said, suspect in me an inclination to contradict and my portrait would be in great danger of destruction. I considered it, therefore, more prudent to wait for him to speak to me, although this course was itself not without danger, as will be seen. At this time the Choquet sale took place. It seems Mme. Choquet died before accomplishing her husband's desire to leave his collection to the Luxembourg Museum, but where indeed it would have been refused on account of Cezanne. He said to me,

"We must go to see the Delacroix!" He pointed out a very important aquarelle by Delacroix, depicting flowers, which had been purchased by Choquet at the sale of Piron's collection, who himself bought it after Delacroix's death, whose executor Piron was. Cezanne told me that Delacroix, among his last wishes gave to certain of his heirs the right to choose, as a memento, any one of his works with the exception of this aquarelle, which was to figure at his mortuary sale. Wishing to show Cezanne the interest I took in his story, I looked up the testament of Delacroix, and the following day when I came to pose, I remarked, "I read the testament of Delacroix. I saw that he spoke, indeed, of a great aquarelle, representing flowers, placed at random against a gray background." "Unfortunate man," exclaimed Cezanne, taking two steps toward me, with threatening fists, "you dare to say that Delacroix painted at random!" I managed to explain his error and he quieted down. "I love Delacroix!" he said to me, as if by way of apology, while I was promising myself to redouble my discretion thereafter. Another time everything presaged an excellent sitting; sky clear gray, dogs not barking, machinery silent at the "hammer factory," a good study at the Louvre, and finally, "la Croix" of that day announced success by the Boers. While rejoicing at these happy omens, suddenly I heard a terrible oath and saw Cezanne with ferocious mien, the palette knife uplifted before my portrait. I remained motionless, speechlessly apprehensive; at last after some seconds, which seemed to me endless, Cezanne turned his fury against another of his canvases, which was immediately reduced to shreds. Here is what had happened. In a corner of the studio there was always an old faded rug lying on the floor. That day, unfortunately, the maid took it away with the praiseworthy purpose of giving it a beating. Cezanne explained to me that it was intolerable to him not to see that rug, and to such an extent that it would be impossible for him to continue my portrait; adding that, besides, he would not touch a brush again in his life. He did not keep his word, fortunately; but the fact is that it was impossible for him to do any work that day.

After one hundred and fifteen sittings Cezanne dropped my portrait in order to return to Aix. "I am not displeased with the front of the shirt," were his last words on parting. He made me

leave at the studio the suit in which I posed, wishing, on his return to Paris, to cover the two small white spots on the hands, and besides, of course, to work over certain details. "I will make some progress by then. You understand, Mr. Vollard, the contour escapes one." But when he spoke again of taking up this canvas he did not count on those beasts of moths which invaded my suit and made it worthless even for posing. When Cezanne laid aside a canvas, it was almost always with the intention of taking it up again later, and with the hope of perfecting it. This explains the unfinished quality of most of his landscapes and their appearance of having been repainted over and over again. This did not concern him, however, for to him "to paint from nature does not mean to copy the object, but only to realize one's sensations," and we can understand, also, that it was this extraordinary conscientiousness, this perpetual re-commencing, that gave rise to the description of him as "the painter powerless to realize his visions," especially as Cezanne did all he could to spread this belief, as when he would tell you with every appearance of conviction, "you see what I lack is the power to realize." It was then that he was the provincial, who everywhere saw, barring his entrance to the Salon de Bouguereau, enemies whom he hoped to disem bitter with the mien of a poor man, humble and timid. How different from the Cezanne who, when pushed inadvertently while at work, would exclaim, casting about furious glances: "Don't they know, then, that I am Cezanne?" He was taunted greatly for his obstinate and unfortunate ambition to be admitted into the official Salons, but we must not forget that he believed implicitly that if he could but slip into the Salon de Bouguereau with a canvas "well realized" the scales would fall from the eyes of the visitors and they would leave Bouguereau in order to follow the great master that he knew himself to be.

When, however, he again found himself before the canvas no trace of this pride remained. One should then have seen him, all his faculties beat upon the "exactness of the form," "searching for the line" with the same conscientiousness that the old Masters show in their best work; and if he were satisfied, which was very seldom, he would exhibit the joy of a schoolboy who had received a good mark. The intensity with which he worked was the cause of his irritation



Portrait

Cézanne



Portrait

Cezanne

when some subject foreign to his painting would suddenly awaken him. "Pardon me, Mr. Vollard," he said one day, before one of his paintings which he had cut up in a fit of anger at being disturbed at his work, "but when I think, I must have quietude."



The Fourth Primary